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CHRISTIANITY ON TRIAL

I.

We are not now thinking of the trial to individual faith which the war has brought. That, God knows, is serious enough. To many a man and woman the events of the past few months have raised the fundamental questions of religion with an insistence and a solemnity of which they had never dreamed before. Is it possible in such a world to believe in a good God? Do the old words that we have so often taken on our lips about God's fatherhood and love correspond to realities, or are they only idle dreams which dissolve at the first contact with reality? These are the questions which many an earnest man and woman has been asking in the weeks that are past. But they are not the questions which we desire to bring before our readers at this time.

The trial of which we propose to speak is not the subjective trial which comes to individual faith, but the larger and more significant issue which is being tested in the life of the race. Is Christianity a practicable religion, not simply for the individual men and women who may choose to embrace it, but for society at large? Is Christ's lordship —supposing we can still believe in it—confined to heaven, or is He to be Master here?

It is no new question. Indeed, it is as old as Christianity. When Christ stood before the high priest in that famous trial scene just before he was led away to Pilate, and answered the high priest's question, "Art thou the Christ?" with his confident, "Thou hast said," he made claim to a sovereignty which has been challenged ever since. The scene in the high priest's court repeats itself from generation to generation as men have asked themselves the question which we propose for our consideration.

Is Christianity socially practicable, a religion for this world and for all of life, or only for that part of it which lies after death?

To this question two answers have been given: the other-worldly and the this-worldly. Some have confined

Christ's sovereignty to the life to come, or, at most, to some little oasis or island in the life here, the monastery, or the nunnery, or the hours of prayer lived apart from men, or the definite sphere of duties and activities marked off from the common lot by religious sanction or ecclesiastical prescription; and others have answered with as confident a "No, Christ is to be Master here. That is what messiahship means; his sovereignty is to include all life, and not merely a part—social and economic and political relations as well as the private life of the soul. The kingdoms of this world are to become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ."

Most of us, we suspect, if we were to recall our attitude eight months ago, would confess ourselves to have been of the latter opinion. However large a place immortality may have played in our religious life, we were unwilling to restrict our religion to the world that lies beyond the grave. The Master we served was a Master who claimed rightful sovereignty over all of life and whose claim we expected to see admitted in increasing measure as the years went on.

But now has come the war, with its rude shock to all our preconceptions, and has forced us again to raise the old question and to retest the grounds of our faith.

It has forced us to test them practically by the contrast between what we see and what we should have expected if Christ's claim were true. It has forced us to test them in theory, because of the definite challenge to which they have been subjected by men who in the name of religion itself have explicity denied their validity.

We are not thinking now of philosophies, atheistic or frankly anti-Christian, like that of Nietzsche, of which so much has been made in recent times. We are thinking of the utterances of religious teachers, professors of theology calling themselves Christian, who explicitly and formally deny that the Christian principle is applicable in international relations, and who hold that Christianity exhausts itself in generating that spirit of self-sacrifice which leads the individual Christian to support, without question, whatever may be decided by the ruling power of the State.

We read recently in an international quarterly an article by a German theological professor on the "Moral Right of War," in which this thesis was maintained, that

war was God's appointed means of readjusting the difference between the true power of any people and their political power at any time. This being the case, the author went on to say, it was the religious duty of any people engaged in war to hold all they had won by the might of the sword, because thus alone could they re-establish the predestined equilibrium and bring the will of God to prevail.

This particular article happened to be written by a German theologian, but it is only a more outspoken expression of a philosophy far more widely held, having its representatives, alas, among all the nations who are engaged in this titanic struggle.

Now, it needs little argument to show that if this philosophy should finally prevail it would mean the bankruptcy of Christianity, so far as any claim to world power is concerned; for Christianity, whatever else it may be, is a religion that transcends national boundaries and proclaims the solidarity of the human race. If the philosophy that underlies the present war comes to prevail we might as well recall our foreign missionaries and abandon the hope of that world conquest upon which we entered so confidently a hundred years ago.

It is no unimportant question that we are raising, but one that reaches down to the very roots of things, one upon the answer to which will depend in the last analysis the future of the great enterprise to which as Christians we are all alike committed. It is our purpose to consider briefly the principles by which this issue must be determined, and then to draw certain conclusions which follow from them.

Our inquiry, we repeat, is as to the social practicability of the Christian religion. What does this inquiry involve? It involves the question whether the principles of Jesus, the principles of love, of trust, of forgiveness, of service, can be made effective throughout the whole range of human relationships, the relations of States as well as of the individual citizens within each; of classes as well as of the units which compose them. There is, to be sure, nothing new in these principles. They were known and practiced by individuals long before Christ came. What was new was the scope of their application. It was the purpose of Jesus Christ to extend this application beyond the

limits of the narrow group of kindred, or of race, within which it had hitherto been confined, until he took in humanity as a whole. The unit for Jesus Christ was mankind. His sovereignty, we repeat, was world sovereignty.

There are two points at which this claim of Christ comes into conflict with the spirit of the time. It comes into conflict with it in the principle of nationalism which restricts its scope. It comes into conflict with it in the principle of force which repudiates its method.

It comes into conflict with the principle of nationalism. Jesus Christ makes mankind the unit. To Jesus all, without exception, are sons of God, and all, without exception, are therefore brothers one of another. But nationalism denies this. It says that where it is a question between the life of my nation and the life of another nation, the right of my own people takes precedence. The principle of self-sacrifice, which is legitimate within the national boundary, breaks down at the frontier, to be replaced by the principle of force.

And this brings us to the second conflict—the conflict of method. How are we going to bring about the sovereignty we desire? Christ says we must bring it about by the free consent of those whom we would win, by love, by service, by forgiveness, by trust. But the spirit of the age believes these to be too weak weapons to be used in so great a cause. For the great ends at stake sterner instruments must be used. Force is necessary if right is to prevail. Militarism and civilization are twin brothers, standing or falling together.

How are we going to tell which is right? What standard shall we bring to bear upon the contesting claimants—Christ and the spirit of the world—to see which is supreme in fact. There are two tests which we may employ. We may consider the alternative which is presented to the acceptance of Christ's sovereignty. We may consider the resources which are at Christ's command.

The prospect opened by the alternative proposal would seem to be grim enough. It is the perpetuation to the end of time of the law of the jungle, a ceaseless struggle for existence, in which the weaker go to the wall, in which might makes right, in which necessity knows no law.

But the singular thing is that as a matter of fact men do not accept this alternative. They do not accept the jungle as their picture of the ideal state. They believe in culture and civilization and humanity and the world-state, and the family of mankind, and all the other beautiful ideals of which Christians are constantly talking. They want to bring these about and organize the world for ideal ends, but they do not think it is practicable to do it in the Christian way. If they fight, as fight they believe they must, it is for these very ideal ends, because they do not believe that any less strenuous method will make their accomplishment possible.

What an unconscious testimony we have here to the extent of Christ's influence! So far at least as ideals are concerned, the world is converted to his principles already. What a contrast to the state of things in the world of the first century! Imagine Julius Cæsar apologizing for going to war and justifying the conquests of the Roman legions on the ground of their benefit to the conquered! So much, at least, Christ has accomplished as to make us permanently dissatisfied with the ethics of war and to make universal brotherhood seem desirable if it could be attained.

II.

But though Christ's ideal be desirable, many men believe that his method is impracticable. For in a world half developed such as this is, with the beast in man still untamed, there is no other way to secure the ideal ends but the method of force. Hence, in the interests of civilization itself, we are urged to arm and threaten and if need be kill and destroy in order that peace may prevail on the earth. So we see nations heaping up their armaments and launching their ultimatums, and philosophers and theologians and scientists justifying the procedure as the only one possible in view of the end which is sought.

Could there be a more preposterous procedure than what we see going on before our eyes to-day? England tells us that she is fighting to destroy German militarism, and for that purpose has transformed herself into a military nation. Germany tells us that she must find some way to force England to grant her the free access to the sea

which she desires for purely peaceable purposes, and for this end she cultivates in her children a hatred of England so intense and passionate as to make the most peaceable Englishman despair of its ever being possible to live at peace with Germany. You cannot sow the wind without reaping the whirlwind. We might have known it before. We see it demonstrated now.

But we did not need to wait for the war in Europe to prove this to us, for it has been demonstrated in our own national existence. Some of us have seen the film play, "The Birth of a Nation." Whatever we may think of the propriety of representing such scenes in public, no one can deny that as a demonstration of the futility of the method of force they teach a lesson which all men may well lay to heart. In the dealing of the North with the South during reconstruction we see the contrast between two methods—the method which says, "These men have done wrong in the past, therefore let us distrust them in the future"; and the method of the great President who said, when asked what he was going to do with the Southern States, "I propose to treat them henceforth as if they had never been away."

This conclusion then follows with an irresistible logic:—either that we must follow the method of Christ, or resign ourselves to a future of anarchy from which the stoutest imagination may well shrink back appalled. The appeal to self-interest has been tried and failed. The appeal to fear has been tried and failed. One method only remains to be tried, the method of forgiveness, of trust, of service.

But is this method practicable? Is the issue a living issue? Must we not confess—shrink from it as we will—that there is no alternative open, things being what they are, and man being what he is, but an endless succession of struggle and failure and hatred, such as has filled the history of mankind in the past?

Certainly if the present be the measure of the future we must do so. If there be no resources in human nature as yet untapped; if there be no reserves of divine reinforcement on which we have not yet drawn, then indeed we must confess the case is hopeless.

But that is not the way we act in other realms of human experience. The one distinguishing and original thing about man is the fact that he has never been willing to

make the past his measure of the future. In man alone among the living creatures that populate the globe do we find the creative and prophetic instinct. Man lives by faith and grasps the thing that is to be while yet it seems impossible. All that we hold most precious in human life, in science, in art, in the state, we owe to this heroic refusal. There was a time when every man's hand was against his neighbor and over all the ranges of forest and plain that had been open to human habitation there was no oasis where a man could take refuge and feel sure that he was safe. But we have created states and nations, and within these at least have substituted law for the sword and confidence for suspicion. There was a time when the seas were barriers that separated men of one land from another by an impassable gulf. There was a time when it seemed as impossible that a man should raise himself above the earth into the air as that he should pull down the mountain by his own unaided strength. But now the seas have become highways for commerce which bind all the world into one, and we can fly above the mountains with a swiftness and security that grow more astonishing with every passing day. Why? Because men have refused to accept this fundamental heresy of unbelief, that because we have failed in the past we must still fail in the future.

So it is in this matter of our Christian faith. If the ideal we hold is really a desirable ideal, and if the only obstacle in the way of its realization is in the human spirit, then we must set about changing that spirit and we must believe that it can be done.

Are we told that it is impossible? But it is being done before our very eyes. It is being done in the interest of the very principles of selfishness and unreason against which as Christians it is our bounden duty to make war. Men are systematically training their fellow-men to hate and distrust, and they are succeeding in their attempt. Do not let us deceive ourselves into believing that the spirit which now reigns over so wide a part of the human race is normal or natural to man. It is a spirit that has been systematically cultivated by men who have their own ends to serve, because they know that if men were not deceived into thinking falsely of their brothers, they could not act as they are acting now.

It is our duty as Christians to conduct a similar campaign as highly organized, as persistent, as intelligent in the interests of the great cause in which we believe, confident that if we do our part we shall win in the end.

My thought goes back to that scene more than a hundred years ago, when a few young men gathered at the haystack at Williams College to consecrate themselves to the task of winning the world to Jesus Christ. What a contrast betwen the resources they commanded and the ideal they entertained! Could one conceive of a more quixotic enterprise than to convert a church which had not as yet so much as dreamed there was such a thing as foreign missions, to the belief that it was really a practicable thing to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to every living man and woman from one end of this wide world to the other? And yet the thing has been done; the change has been brought about. For millions of Christians to-day the foreign missionary enterprise seems a practicable enterprise, and the faith in Christ's ability to conquer the world has become a living faith.

We face to-day a new phase of the same great enterprise, and again the timorous voices sound in our ears, bidding us despair of success. It is for us to meet the challenge with the heroic courage of those earlier adventurers, to marshal the resources which are already at our command, to begin a canvass for new recruits to reinforce our ranks, and to lay far-reaching plans for the new campaign that is to issue in ultimate victory.

What are the resources at the command of Christ? That is our second question. Do not let us underestimate them because thus far they are still disorganized and unvocal. All over the world there are men and women in increasing numbers who have seen the vision that we have seen, of a world which is really Christian, a world in which love shall be the law of life, trust the hope of progress, and forgiveness, based upon the consciousness of common failure, open the door from the dead past to a new and more splendid future. They are found in every one of the warring armies, like that poor wounded Frenchman of whom Madame Buiton wrote to Mr. Gosse, who, when asked what he was fighting for, answered: "I am fighting for my son, that he may be free from that nightmare fear of war under

which I have lived all my life." They are found in a million homes among those women who are waking to new self-consciousness not only of the social privileges but of the social responsibilities of motherhood; women like those whose voices are being heard across the trenches and above the din of the bursting shells in such utterances as the Chrismas letter of the English women to the women of Germany and Austria, and the answer that came back from them. They are found among those Christians of every name and of every land who were grown ashamed of a religion which shelters itself under the great name of Christ and is content to accept his promise of individual salvation while it turns a deaf ear to his call to go out into all the world and preach his Gospel not only to every creature, but in every relationship of life.

But we have other allies still, allies of which as yet we have taken too little account because they belong to that unseen world that is still waiting to be born. There is that better man in men who sleeps in every human breast, waiting for the voice that can arouse him from his slumbers and summon him to that real world for which he was made and in which alone he is at home, the man who is lover, reverent of women, father tender of children, friend responsive to sympathy, patriot loyal to country, worshipper destined for God. This undiscovered man, citizen of Christ's kingdom that is to be, is waiting to be found and roused and organized for the greatest of all enterprises and the most splendid of all campaigns.

So much for the principles involved. A single word in conclusion as to the consequences. If what we have said of Christ's claim to world sovereignty is true, then it is our duty as Christians to make this central in our thinking as we have never done before, and to apply it to the great issues which now confront us, in order that we may generate the public sentiment which is to be our ally in the great enterprise to which we are committed. We must apply it to the causes of war, showing that back of all the individual blunders of diplomatists and statesmen lie the twin evils of selfishness and unbelief, against which in every age it is the duty of the Christian to wage ceaseless war. We must apply it to the remedy for war, showing that back of treaties and courts and international

police, and whatever machinery we may devise to express and enforce our new ideals, there must be a new spirit, a spirit of brotherhood which is the spirit of forgiveness and trust and love. We must begin the application of these principles at home in our own lives as individuals, testing ourselves as we have never tested ourselves before, to see whether as a matter of fact we are truly Christians in that unconscious faith that speaks through acts and sentiments more loudly than through words. We must apply it in our own social class, reminding the men and women with whom we are most intimately connected that the lines that separate us into social groups are not ultimate, but only subdivisions in the organization of the one great family of God. We must apply it to our country, testing our own conduct toward other nations by the principles of Jesus Christ, preparing ourselves for whatever work we may be called to do as interpreters and helpers of our sister nations at strife, by showing that in our own conduct as a people we are loyal to the principles we preach. And then we must organize. We must apply to the marshaling of the forces of Christ the same far-sighted strategy and the same indomitable persistence that has wrought such marvels in the creation of the great armies that are committed to the cause we oppose; organization that shall include not only those who call themselves by the Christian name, but all those of whatever name, or of no name, who have felt the movings of the Christian spirit, and who are striving, however, dumbly and blindly, toward the Christian goal. We need a new crusade that shall marry the enthusiasm of faith to the intelligence of science, and never rest or despair until it has enlisted under the banner of Christ all those whose hearts have been touched by the spirit of Christ and whose conscience owns his sway.

How it would dignify and ennoble the life of religion if we should do this! How the difficulties that now perplex us and the strife that separates us from one another would vanish in the face of this supreme and most glorious issue! How the great words which we have so often repeated in our creeds and which we are invited again to utter in renewed confession to-day—deity, atonement, resurrection, authority—would fill up with new and august meaning as they were translated from the language of

word into the more resonant tones of conduct! What criminal folly our present divisions would seem in the light of that new ideal of church unity which shall conceive the church as the army of the living God, organized to win the kingdoms of the world to be the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ!

CHRISTIANITY ON TRIAL

by

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